



Module 2: Communicating with a person with intellectual disability

Strategies for optimal communication

Talk to the person where she feels comfortable, i.e. a familiar, quiet location of her choice (Biklen & Mosley, 1988).

Reduce any visual or auditory distractions in the room e.g. turn off the television, turn off the radio, meet in a place away from others coming and going. You will be more likely to find a quiet meeting place at a day service or work place than in a person's home.

To get started it is useful to share some information about yourself. Talk about the weather and whether you like it or not. Talk about how you got to the meeting. Show the person pictures on your phone of what you did on the weekend. Show the person through gesture and facial expression as well as words some of the things which you yourself really enjoy doing.

Use concrete words that are easy to visualise e.g. "things you like", "what you like doing"; "your perfect day". Avoid abstract words that are hard to visualise e.g. "hopes", "dreams", "goals". Some people will be able to understand these abstract concepts, but start the conversation with more concrete concepts.

Concepts of past and future, and remembering dates, can be difficult to understand, so use life markers or events in the person's life (Finlay & Lyons, 2001; Booth & Booth, 1994).

There are no clear guidelines for question formats when communicating with someone with an intellectual disability. However a few studies that have compared question formats indicate that 'either/or' questions followed by

'yes/no' questions and then by multiple choice questions can be useful (Malik, Ashton-Schaeffer & Kleiber, 1991; Sigelman et.al 1983).

Try to use who, what and where questions as these are easier than when, why and how questions (Rowland, Pine, Lieven & Theakston, 2003).

When giving choices, use pictures to help the person remember the options and limit the options to around 2 or 3. In addition it is useful to:

- Be observant. Body language and tone of voice can give you a lot of information (Martin et al. 2012). These non-verbal signals can help you to know when the person feels strongly about a topic or when he doesn't really care either way.
- Try asking questions in different ways to check that you have been understood. For example 'You're smiling a lot when you look at that picture of mini golf? Tell me about mini golf? So you really like mini golf? Would you like to play real golf on a big golf course? Would you prefer real golf or mini golf?'

Remember to pause and give the person time to think and respond. Take equal turns in the conversation.

Be comfortable with long periods of silence in the conversation while the person thinks.

Let the person tell their story without interruption, and bring them back to bits of story later if you need more information.

Don't negate goals and aspirations, because they sound complex, costly, or potentially unachievable for the person in their current situation.

Explore goals, possibilities and the sub-goals that could help the person move towards their ultimate goal.

Spend time clarifying what the person really wants, not just what he says he wants. For example, a person may say they want to go bowling, but that might be the only time during the week that she sees Jane. Her goal may actually be to see Jane more often, rather than to go bowling.

Remember that each person you meet will have different abilities and support needs. Try out different strategies and see what works best for that person.

References

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